

Highlands Lakes & Trails Committee Report

June 6, 2024, Board Meeting

Jim Hale asked the Lakes & Trails Committee to investigate the current condition of the Swift Creek Hiking Trail, in the Sundial Farms Subdivision, and make a recommendation to the Board concerning future management of this hiking trail.

When the Lakes & Trails Committee was formed in 2023, the list of responsibilities in the Charter included the Swift Creek Trail that runs from the cul-de-sac on Amara Dr. south to the cul-de-sac on Fedora Dr. The Charter also included a statement that the trail had not yet been deeded to the HCA; however, since that time it has been determined that the trail was deeded to the HCA in 2023; according to the County Property records found by the Committee, the upper section of land along Swift Creek off Amara Dr. is 13.38ac and was deeded to the HCA 6/23/23 and the lower section, which includes Highland Pond, is 26.29ac and was deeded 9/23/23.

Recently Rick Stayman and Fred Leckie walked the trail to evaluate the condition and help make a recommendation to the Board. Following is an account of their findings: Rick and Fred began at the Amara Dr. cul-de-sac entrance; there is no designated parking area for the trail, so one is left with parking along the curb in front of private homes; also there are no signs indicating there is a hiking trail. They proceeded down a mulch path that runs from the cul-de-sac downhill toward Swift Creek.



As they got to the bottom, the mulch path ended and from there on the trail was just a “clearing” through the woods, kind of washed out and eroded in the beginning.



This first ¼mile section along Swift Creek is not marked (actually none of the trail is marked but it would have been especially helpful in this early section) and the cleared area that seemed to be the path soon runs out altogether, running into several piles of woody flood debris and tall grass/weed growth. Rick had walked this trail once before but started at the other end (off Fedora Dr.) and he can remember that he reached a point where it was not clear where the trail was or what direction

to go, but he was sure that he was up on the hill near some homes when this happened. So, there were a couple of trees that had faint orange paint marks that we used to start up a pretty steep grade in the woods to reach the top of a hill just below some houses.



By walking through the woods across the top of the hill, they were able to find what looked like a cleared path through the woods that was the trail. They continued to follow the trail through the woods that lead up and down ravines and had a couple bridges across ravines (one bridge was washed out on one end), several culverts for run-off to go under the trail, and some wooden beam steps up some steep grades leading out of ravines. Also, there were some large logs across the trail in several areas.





About halfway through the hike, the trail became much more pronounced because of the obvious use by a 4-wheeler(s) and dirt bike(s); the trail in this area was being “maintained” by the use of these off-road vehicles. These vehicles are not coming in from the trail ends; Rick and Fred found several off-road vehicle trails leading down to the hiking trail from the houses just above the trail.





Finally the trail makes a turn to the right and they encountered a mulch trail again that leads up to the Highland Pond Dam where the trail crosses the dam and continues up to Fedora Dr. cul-de-sac.





Rick had a walking App that indicated they walked 1.26 miles in just over 47 minutes. Overall, the trail is not a “formal” trail like other trails in the Highlands; there are no paved or mulched sections (other than the very short sections at both ends) and most of the trail consists of a natural forest floor, “cleared” path through the woods. The trail is not marked at all, there are no signs at the “entrances” to the trail, there are downed trees/logs across the trail in several places, and there are no trail-specific parking spaces at either end. And it is clear that a 4-wheeler(s) and possibly a dirt bike(s) are coming into the woods from housing sections along the trail and appear to be helping keep the trail “open” and not growing over. Neither Rick or Fred has any idea how many people are using or want to use this trail, or what the “demand” is for the Board to maintain this trail, but assuming the Board wants to keep this trail as an asset, the Committee offers the following recommendations and suggestions:

- 1) The trail should be maintained in its current state, meaning it should continue to be a “rustic” trail through the woods.
- 2) The trail needs to have HCA Hiking Trail entrance signs at each end (cul-de-sacs on Amara and Fedora).
- 3) The trail must be clearly marked with trail signs or painted wooden stakes, so people can be confident they are on the trail.
- 4) At least once a year, a crew should walk the entire trail with brush cutters and chain saws to make sure downed trees/logs and vegetation growth are cleared from obstructing the trail.
- 5) With the Board’s approval, in the near future, the Committee would like to meet on-site with a rep from the Landscape Committee, Dave Thomas of Estate Care, and a rep from ACS West, to collectively decide what needs to be done (marking the trail, developing and installation of signs, annual or ongoing maintenance clearing and structure repairs, mulch at trail entrances, etc.) and who will be responsible for getting it done.
- 6) The Committee would like some help to find a person that regularly uses the trail and can be a Trail Watch to help report maintenance needs in a timely fashion. Perhaps a member of the Board has been contacted about the trail condition and would be interested in becoming part of the solution.